DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 517 CG 025 920

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TITLE	Gender Role Socialization in Jewish Men.
PUB DATE	Aug 94
NOTE	7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (102nd, Los Angeles, CA, August 12-16, 1994).
PUB TYPE	Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Family Influence; Identification (Psychology); *Jews; Judaism; *Males; Peer Influence; Religious Cultural Groups; *Role Conflict; *Role Perception; Role Theory; *Sex Role; Social Cognition; *Socialization; Social Values
IDENTIFIERS	Jewish Culture

ABSTRACT

There has been little empirical research on the gender role socialization of Jewish men. This paper explores Jewish male gender role socialization and provides a model by which gender and ethnicity may be studied. A description of the gender role socialization of Jewish men, with an emphasis on advantages and disadvantages of such socialization from a developmental perspective, is presented. Special attention is given to messages received from parents in early childhood, peer interactions, and adult family life. Additionally, ways in which Jewish men compare themselves to other men are examined. It seems that the gender role socialization of Jewish men may cause diminished self-esteem in childhood and adolescence, with the rejection of Jewish cultural values as a possible outcome. Jewish boys are likely to admire the stereotypical American male, thereby discounting the image of the Jewish man. Emulation and denigration of certain stereotypical traits of other racial/ethnic minority men sometimes occurs. However, in mid-life, Jewish men may embrace the values that were once rejected, finding wealth of previously unexplored resources from early socialization. Rejection of the dominant culture's ideal man follows, leaving a strengthened Jewish identity. (RJM)

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Gender Role Socialization in Jewish Men

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Presented at the 102nd annual APA convention, 1994

Running head: GENDER ROLE SOCIALIZATION

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Introduction

In spite of the fact that American Jews are often highly assimilated, many cultural traits have remained in Jewish communities, and the effects on Jewish men are significant. There has been very little empirical research on the gender role socialization of Jewish men. Aside from isolated unpublished dissertations and a study of Israeli children (Dershowitz, 1984), there is a paucity of empirical work in the area. Therefore, our paper will serve as an exploratory study of Jewish male gender role socialization and provide a model by which gender and ethnicity may be studied. In this paper we will briefly present a description of the gender role socialization of Jewish men, with emphasis on advantages and disadvantages of such socialization from a developmental perspective. Special attention will be given to messages received from parents in early childhood, peer interaction, and adult family life. Additionally, we will look at the ways in which Jewish men compare themselves to men of the dominant culture as well as men of other racial/ethnic minorities. Finally, we will conclude with recommendations for further research.

Early Socialization

Although Jews constitute neither a race nor a nationality, they do maintain strong cultural characteristics which are taught to children. Jewish boys are encouraged by parents to be gentle, kind, and emotional. Contrary to the dominant culture's stereotype of masculinity, Jews' construction of boyhood is one of respect for mother and father, emotional sensitivity, and kindness toward others (Kimmel, 1987). Parents may also be overprotective and restraining. Marshall Sklare's (1971) ethnography of American Jews describes a contractual relationship between parent and child in which protection, love, and support are provided by the parents in exchange for *nachas*, or pleasure and gratification, which can only be given by the child. Jewish boys who fail to meet their parent's expectations (academic excellence, for example) are unable to provide the *nachas* that is expected of them, and this sense of failure may be a source of low self-esteem and/or insecurity. By contrast, mainstream boys provide their parents with pride by meeting a different set of expectations. Athletic ability, independence, and emotional restraint are taught to mainstream boys, and those who fulfill these expectations are rewarded.

Additionally, socialization that differs from the mainstream stereotype could diminish self-esteem due to the cognitive dissonance of a boy who is criticized at school for behaving as he was taught at home. Interaction with children at school who have been socialized by mainstream notions of masculinity may pose conflicts and create tension for Jewish boys. It is the Jewish boy who is likely to be targeted as a sissy or girlish. Such teasing, which is viewed by majority children as a source of character building and a contribution to the development of coping strategies, may be experienced by Jewish boys as punitive and a dilemma from which they see no alternatives without violating cultural proscriptions. In order to compensate for perceived feelings of inadequacy, Jewish boys may actively involve themselves in fights or rough sports to demonstrate their masculinity.

Adolescence

Development of scholarship has long been valued in the Jewish tradition, with origins most likely found in the study of Torah and Talmud. A great deal of pressure is placed on the Jewish adolescent to achieve academically. Socialized to study rather than play football, the Jewish adolescent stands outside of the mainstream masculine image. The clearest example of the Jewish emphasis on intellectual rather than physical skill is the Bar-Mitzvah, which represents the Jewish boy's rite of passage into manhood. In the eyes of the Jewish community, boys are elevated into manhood after they have demonstrated knowledge of the Torah and have publicly chanted special verses in Hebrew. Whereas other racial/ethnic groups may use athletic ability as a demarcation of adult masculinity, Jews rely upon intellectual skills.

In an effort to gain acceptance by peers, the Jewish adolescent male may rebel against his cultural norms and try to fulfill the masculine image of the dominant culture. In doing so, he may deny or rebel against his own culture's conception of ideal masculinity, possibly developing a sense of self-hatred and/or an attempt to 'pass' as a non-Jew (Lewin, 1941). Self-hatred among Jewish adolescents functions in the same way that homophobia does for gay and lesbian teens. The dominant culture's message is that the minority (Jewish, homosexual) is inferior, and the message is internalized. In an attempt to meet the dominant culture's expectations, Jewish teens may overcompensate by hating themselves.

During adolescence, emerging sexuality and the need for peer approval may bring a heightened awareness of one's minority group membership. Jewish adolescents may admire other ethnic/racial boys who stereotypically embody traits that Jews seemingly lack. For example, African-American males may be envied for their apparent athletic prowess, Italians and Poles for their toughness. Conversely, Jewish boys may attempt to raise their

self-esteem by negatively stereotyping other minority men. By stereotyping Hispanics as stupid or lazy, for instance, Jewish adolescents can by comparison enhance their own self worth. Nevertheless, majority men are likely to be perceived as superior by Jewish adolescents in American culture. Messages from peers and mass media continually reinforce the image of the stereotypic macho male, and in an effort to gain acceptance and approval, most adolescents are likely to admire and strive for this image. Similarly, adolescent Jewish boys are likely to assume that girls are attracted to boys who embody the mainstream's ideal masculine image, and as sexual desire develops in adolescents, efforts to attract lovers may involve emulation of the mainstream stereotype.

Mid-life

One of the most important points in the stages of adult development is mid-life, at which men begin reappraising the past and considering the future (Levinson, 1978). Men around age forty evaluate their successes and failures and attempt to restructure their lives for a new beginning. Changing one's career, going back to school, divorcing and remarrying may all signify a turning point at which mid-life men try to succeed where they failed in the past.

At mid-life, Jewish men like all others are likely to grow reflective and introspective, examining themselves as they have never done. Characteristics that had previously been suppressed are now explored. Emotional sensitivity is more likely to be seen as an asset in interpersonal relationships, especially with lovers and children. Intelligence and wisdom may now be valued as previously unexplored resources.

Intellectual achievement that was previously devalued in younger years is likely to become a source of pride and accomplishment (Kimmel, 1988). At mid-life, the need to demonstrate stereotypic masculinity may diminish, and the conceptualization of masculinity may change from a mainstream definition to a more specifically Jewish one. If this occurs, the Jewish father is likely to continue the socialization process by passing on Jewish culture and values to his own children, demonstrating an affinity for his Jewish socialization which he once rejected.

The desire to emulate majority men and/or negatively stereotype other racial/ethnic minority men may diminish with an appreciation of Jewish values. Majority masculine stereotypes may in turn be devalued when seen as less sensitive and lacking intellect.

Recommendations for research

Empirical research should assess Jewish male socialization and determine its impact. Information is also needed about masculinity across racial/ethnic groups. To address these issues directly, researchers must study how Jewish boys, adolescents, and men evaluate themselves in comparison to boys from other racial/ethnic minorities, with special emphasis on conceptions of masculinity across racial/ethnic groups. Studies should also examine the ways boys, adolescents, young adults, and mid-life adults perceive their parents values of masculinity. For example, how do Jewish and non-Jewish boys perceive Jewish parental messages about being a man compared to perceptions of mainstream messages? Longitudinal studies of Jewish boys and men along several dimensions such as self-esteem, gender role identity, and self-efficacy should be conducted. Further analysis should focus on Jewish parenting and parent-child relationships. Research in this area could support the theory of socialization outlined in this paper.

Conclusion

The gender role socialization of Jewish men may cause diminished self-esteem in childhood and adolescence, with the rejection of Jewish cultural values as a possible outcome. Jewish boys are likely to admire the stereotypical American male, thereby discounting the image of the Jewish man. Emulation and denigration of certain stereotypical traits of other racial/ethnic minority men may also take place. However, in mid-life Jewish men may embrace the values that were once rejected, finding a wealth of previously unexplored resources from early socialization. Rejection of the dominant culture's ideal man follows, with a strengthened Jewish identity.

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